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Friend or Foe? The Relationship Between Facebook Use and Satisfaction and Jealousy in Long-  
Distance Dating Relationships

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the relationship between the social media site, Facebook, and long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs) among college students. As more and more college students choose to use sites such as Facebook to maintain and continue their romantic relationships, it is vital that scholars understand the effects. Many suggest that Facebook can help preserve the romantic relationship when face-to-face communication is limited. However the findings of this study propose that the use of Facebook can cause relational uncertainty, jealous, and dissatisfaction. A convenience/purposive sample of 74 collegiate students, who are currently or have recently been engaged in a long-distance relationship and possess an active Facebook, participated in a survey study to answer the three proposed hypotheses. Although the results were not strong enough to yield a significant conclusion, the findings showed that there was an increase in jealousy as one partner spent more time on Facebook than the other partner. The study concludes with the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

*Key Words: long-distance dating relationships, Facebook, uncertainty reduction theory, jealousy, relationship satisfaction*

## Friend or Foe? The Relationship Between Facebook Use and Satisfaction and Jealousy in Long-Distance Dating Relationships

In recent years, social media sites, like Facebook, have become increasingly popular as a means for maintaining contact within geographically distant relationships. Included within the scope of these geographically distant relationships are long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs). As LDDRs become more prevalent among college populations, college students in turn tend to use sites like Facebook to maintain and continue their romantic relationships. On one hand, while the use of Facebook can assist in relational maintenance behaviors and may provide increased opportunities for romantic partners to communicate (Nitzburg & Farber, 2013), sharing information and photos on the platform may strain long-distance relationships. Thus, through a cross-sectional survey, the purpose of this study is to examine how LDDR partners use Facebook and whether differences in use relate to negative consequences including relational uncertainty, jealousy, and dissatisfaction. Before specifically posing the predictions, it is necessary to review relevant bodies of literature including Uncertainty Reduction Theory, LDDRs, Facebook, jealousy, and relationship satisfaction.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Uncertainty Reduction Theory**

Uncertainty Reduction Theory is oftentimes analyzed and applied to communication in the context of newly initiated relationships; however, research has argued for its consideration within already established relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). The theory posits that people in relationships seek to reduce the uncertainty they might have about their partner by obtaining information about him or her (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Afifi & Reichert, 1996). Dainton and Aylor (2001) confirm that relational uncertainty is a common experience of those in established

relationships, and is defined as “uncertainty about the status or future of the relationship” (p. 173). Knobloch and Solomon (1999) categorize relational uncertainty as an intrinsic factor, as it causes uncertainty about the equality of commitment between two partners in a relationship. In their cross-sectional self-report study of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university, Knobloch and Solomon (1999) found that relational uncertainty is based upon a foundation of “doubts about desire, evaluations, and goals for a relationship” (p. 272). Other sources of uncertainty in relationships arise from behavioral and cognitive elements, which include norms of appropriate behavior, questions regarding the relationship value and goals, and perceived competition from third parties (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Emmers & Canary, 1996).

Uncertainty is particularly prevalent in long-distance dating relationships, where information about one’s romantic partner is not easily attainable and concerns about the relationship’s future may arise. Dainton and Aylor (2001), in a cross-sectional study of undergraduate students in romantic relationships, found a positive relationship between the decrease in face-to-face (FtF) communication, which occurs with geographic separation, and uncertainty. The “abundant gaps” between FtF contacts induce a desire for heightened certainty within the relationship, and can lead LD couples to make plans for when they reunite (Sahlstein, 2006). However, certainty in the form of planning may ultimately lead to increased uncertainty as partners may over-plan their reunions and become uncertain of the relationship after compensating for the time spent apart. Furthermore, Sahlstein’s (2006) “segmentation effect” of LD couples also reflects the planning’s impact on uncertainty, as romantic partners’ individual and relational lives may not match up. This discrepancy between their time together and time apart, as well as the other’s attitudes and experiences, might not reflect their expectations of both lifestyles.

### **Long-Distance Dating Relationships**

In recent years, an increase in geographic mobility and the introduction and adoption of communicative technologies such as social media sites (SMS), email, and cellular phones, have attributed to a corresponding increase in long distance relationships (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Commitments such as education, careers, and the military, among others, have also created demand for maintaining relationships over long distances (Stafford, 2005; Dainton & Aylor, 2001). College campuses in particular are also seeing an increase in LDDRs with approximately 25% to 50% of students being currently engaged in a geographically distant relationship (Stafford, 2005).

An LDDR is defined as a romantic relationship in which partners experience less time FtF, and thus maintain their connection via mediated communication as a result of being geographically separated (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Nitzburg & Farber, 2013). Through a cross-sectional study of 400 students in committed, premarital LDDRs at a large Midwestern university, Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that with a decrease in FtF communication, college LDDR couples experience less everyday talk, or “day-to-day communication” that provides information about the other partner’s character. This, in turn, limits the richness and breadth of conversational topics, and thus reduces the amount of insight one may have into his or her partner’s construction of meaning and positive and negative qualities (Stafford & Merolla, 2007, p. 38). Deficiency in FtF communication among LD couples is also linked with an increase in uncertainty about the relationship that is aggravated when a partner doubts the relationship’s future (Maguire & Kinney, 2010). Such uncertainty may threaten the status of an LDDR and could lead to greater relational dissatisfaction and eventually relational harm or termination.

### **New Technologies and Long-Distance Relationships**

The development of Facebook and other social media platforms provide LD couples with a means to continue and maintain contact despite geographic distance (Nitzburg & Farber, 2013). Facebook is a profile-based SMS that shows the connections between users and their social network, or ‘friends,’ and is primarily used for maintaining social relationships (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Ellison et al., 2007). The site is designed so each member has a profile that contains personal information regarding age, sex, interests, and other basic information; a profile picture that identifies the member; and a wall, upon which a member – or his or her friends – can post statuses, pictures, and comments. As a result, a user’s friends may see these tagged photos and statuses, via accessing the user’s profile or reading through their respective Newsfeed.

Though romantic relationships maintained across geographic distance may be hindered by relational dissatisfaction and complications, Facebook can help mitigate stressors in LDDRs, and may even increase satisfaction among LD couples. Through a self-report diary study of sixty-seven college students in LDDRs, Jiang and Hancock (2013) found that compared to geographically close couples, the use of intimacy-enhancing procedures, including increased self-disclosure and idealized partner responsiveness, by LD couples is related to an increase in intimacy. These procedures suggest that LD couples’ perception of intimacy depends on “being understood, validated, and cared for by their partners” (Jiang & Hancock, 2013, p. 572).

Similarly, the utilization of more intimate and positive everyday talk and adaption to the LD context of relationships encourages greater satisfaction in LD relationships (Stafford, 2010). In particular, Utz and Beukeboom (2011) note four different Facebook uses that increase relational satisfaction: users can display their relationship status, use a profile picture that shows them and their romantic partner, upload pictures with their partner, and communicate with and about their

partner. These public displays of affection demonstrate a partner's commitment, and connect to greater sentiments of relational happiness.

However, while Facebook and other SMS may aid in relational satisfaction and enhanced connection, the increased availability of information about one's romantic partner can also create and/or reinforce jealousy, distrust, and dissatisfaction. As Muise et al. (2009) found, Facebook's accessibility exposes relational partners to information they might not be necessarily notified of otherwise. Tagged photos of one's partner can be concerning for partners' level of jealousy and trust, particularly within ambiguous contexts and when previous romantic partners are involved (Sheets et al., 1997).

### **Jealousy and Dissatisfaction**

Jealousy is defined as "a complex of thoughts, emotions and actions that follows loss or threat to self-esteem and/or the existence or quality of the romantic relationship," whether real or perceived (White, 1980, p. 222; Fleischmann et al., 2005). In a longitudinal trend study of two groups of 196 students at a large southwestern university, Afifi and Reichert (1996), found that jealousy is an outcome of relational uncertainty. In accordance with the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, an increased sense of uncertainty leads to more information seeking processes, which, with the presence of Facebook, may lead romantic partners to increase surveillance of their partner. The nature of Facebook as providing information that might not be accessible or divulged otherwise might expose partners to potentially "jealousy-provoking information" (Muise et al., 2009, p. 443). In particular, jealousy can oftentimes be incurred from viewing third-party threats, ambiguous information, or by not being tagged in a partner's Facebook photos (Muscanell et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2009). As a result, "heightened jealousy leads to increased surveillance of a partner's Facebook page," thus creating a feedback loop of jealousy



and surveillance (Muisse et al., 2009, p. 443; Nitzburg & Farber, 2013). Each of these three sources of jealousy threatens a partner's perception of the relationship's future, and can cause relational uncertainty.

Through a cross-sectional survey study of 342 undergraduate students at an Australian university, Elphinston and Noller (2011) found a positive relationship between dissatisfaction and increased Facebook use, which suggests that although Facebook can be used for maintaining and sometimes enhancing LDDRs, a greater use of the SMS can create both dissatisfaction and jealousy within these romantic relationships.

### **Hypotheses:**

In sum, romantic couples engaging in LDDRs tend to experience heightened relational uncertainty, as FtF communication and access to information regarding one's partner may be limited. Additionally, the use of the SMS Facebook has been suggested to hinder relational satisfaction and increase jealousy in romantic relationships. The present study seeks to advance knowledge regarding the use of Facebook and the negative outcomes for LDDRs overall, particularly in comparison of unequal use by LD partners. Based upon the abovementioned literature, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: Unequal Facebook use among partners in long-distance dating relationships will be related to dissatisfaction with the relationship.
- H2: When one partner in a long-distance dating relationship is tagged in more Facebook posts than the other it will be related to dissatisfaction with the relationship.
- H3: When one partner in a long-distance dating relationship is more active on Facebook than his or her partner, the less active partner will have more jealousy.

### **Method**

## **Participants and Procedure**

A convenience/purposive sample of 74 collegiate students (78.3% female, 21.7% male) between the ages of 18 and 29 ( $M = 21.75$ ,  $SD = 2.503$ ) who are currently or have recently been engaged in a long-distance relationship and have a Facebook profile participated in this cross-sectional survey study. A variety of class rankings were represented in the sample, with 29.6% being freshmen, 21.5% sophomores, 31% juniors, 17.5% seniors, and 0.2% unclassified.

The questionnaire was distributed via the social networking site, Facebook, over a one-week period of time. Social media was used to distribute the questionnaire as a way to ensure that all participants are active Facebook users.

## **Materials**

The questionnaire was created on the online survey site [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com) and then distributed via Facebook. No other materials were needed for the study; it was low cost and paperless.

## **Measures**

The questionnaire used in this study was made up of 29 items. The first two items were consent questions used to confirm that participants not only gave their consent to participating in the survey, but also to verify that they are currently in a long-distance relationship in which Facebook activity is present. Then five of the items were measured on a matching scale, which consisted of questions regarding similarity of Facebook use. An additional three matching items measured the similarity of Facebook partner activity, and seven items measured relationship satisfaction. Six items consisted of questions regarding jealousy. Finally, the last section of the questionnaire contained demographic questions along with questions regarding personal Facebook use and relationships. An informed consent at the beginning portion of the

questionnaire was used to ensure that participants were 18 years of age or older, and that they were willing to participate in the study.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using Hendrick and Dicke's (1998) 7-item self-report, Likert-type scale on relationship assessment (1= Unsatisfied, 5= Extremely Satisfied). These items were used to assess participants' overall satisfaction and effort in their long-distance relationships. Questions included: "To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?" and "How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?" (Reverse coded).

**Jealousy.** Jealousy was assessed with a 6-item self-report, Likert-type scale developed by Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Questions asked about the possibility of a third party being involved with a participant's partner and behaviors enacted within their relationship that might be a result of jealousy such as "I call my boyfriend/girlfriend unexpectedly, just to see where he/she is."

**Facebook Use.** An original 5-item self-report, Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was used to assess participant's perception of their own Facebook use in comparison to their partner's. Items included: "My partner updates their status on Facebook more often than me" along with, "My partner likes people's postings, including pictures, more often than me."

**Facebook Activity.** Three original Likert scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) were used to measure specific Facebook activities that might lead to partner jealousy. Items included: "My partner is tagged in events on Facebook that I didn't know he or she attended" along with "In regards to Facebook, it appears that my partner has a more active social life than I do."

**Demographics and Relationship Information.** Participants' sex, age, year in school, as well as the length of their relationship and general Facebook use were also assessed.

## Results

H1: The first hypothesis predicted that unequal Facebook use among partners in LDDRs will be related to dissatisfaction within the relationship. A Pearson's  $r$  correlation was computed measuring the mean of matching Facebook use among partners and relational satisfaction. Based on the data in the sample, there was a small, negative correlation between Facebook use and relational satisfaction ( $r = -.07$ ), such that the more frequently a romantic partner uses Facebook, the less satisfied he or she might be within the relationship. However, while the prediction was supported directionally, the correlation was not strong enough to form a definitive conclusion about the prediction.

H2: The second hypothesis predicted that when one partner in an LDDR is tagged in more Facebook posts than the other it will be related to dissatisfaction within the relationship. Another Pearson's  $r$  correlation was computed measuring differences in how often one partner is tagged in posts on Facebook as opposed to the other against the mean of relational satisfaction. Based on the data in the sample, there was a small, positive correlation between the differences in amount of tagged posts on Facebook and relational satisfaction ( $r = .07$ ), such that as the differences in tagging between people in the relationship increased, there was a decrease in relational satisfaction. However, the correlation was not large enough to make a definitive assumption about the prediction.

H3: The third hypothesis predicted that when one partner in a LDDR is more active on Facebook than his or her partner, the less active partner will experience more jealousy. Pearson's  $r$  was computed, measuring the mean of Facebook activity among partners and the mean of

jealousy. Based on the data from the sample, there was a small to medium, positive correlation between Facebook activity and jealousy ( $r = .26$ ). These results suggest that increased Facebook activity could potentially lead to increased feelings of jealousy, thus, lending to the support of the hypothesis.

## **Discussion**

### **Implications**

Based upon previous findings regarding the use of Facebook and its relationship with jealousy and relational satisfaction, the present analysis of the social media platform in the context of LDDRs confirmed the prediction of an increase in jealousy as one's LD partner spends more time on Facebook. This imbalance in Facebook use could reinforce feelings of jealousy as the less active partner might view his or her partner as having a greater social life, for instance. These findings reinforce Muise et al. (2009) and Sheets et al. (1997) confirmations that the accessibility Facebook provides LD partners exposes them to otherwise potentially undisclosed information, which could then lead to an increase in jealousy. As such, while previous research has found that Facebook can be a positive means to maintaining LDDRs, this study's results suggest that the social media platform could be detrimental to these relationships when partners spend unequal amounts of time on the site.

The study predicted that an unequal use of Facebook by LD couples would also increase dissatisfaction within the relationship. Interestingly, this hypothesis was not strongly supported. However, the prediction that there would be a relationship between relational dissatisfaction and an imbalance in tagged Facebook posts turned out to be the opposite of what the data showed. Even though it was not strongly supported, there was a relationship between a greater imbalance in tagged Facebook posts and increased relational satisfaction. This could potentially be due to

one partner being proud or supportive of the other partner's active life, or due to the less active partner enjoying the updates about what his or her significant other is doing. Overall, these results suggest that while an imbalance in Facebook use by LD partners has a positive relationship with jealousy, this jealousy might not, in turn, significantly affect relational satisfaction. However, as the margin of the results was not strong enough to yield a definite conclusion, future research should seek to extend more emphasis on the relationship between Facebook use and relational satisfaction in order to attain more conclusive results.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Although the hypotheses were ultimately unsupported, the results showed potential for future research to further seek to understand these variables' effects on relationships. One explanation for the weak results acquired by the questionnaire is that the researchers used a five-point Likert scale for the measurements. Many participants answered with neutral responses; in effect, results were not as conclusive as they would have been had a four-point Likert scale been employed. However, with the limited amount of time and resources to complete the survey, the response rate was considerably high, as 74 respondents participated in the online survey during a five-day period. Additionally, in order to combat possible acquiescence, the researchers included several reverse-coded questions in the relationship satisfaction section.

While there were several strengths to the study, there were a variety of limitations that affected the outcome of the results. Because the researchers utilized a convenience sample and a survey methodology, results are only true of the population surveyed, and causal claims cannot be made. A great majority of respondents were female, which impacts the results acquired. The low representation of males influences the variety of viewpoints collected, and does not create a full picture of how collegiate students in general view the impact of Facebook on their LDDRs.

Furthermore, a major pitfall in the research is the fact that both relational partners were not studied. For this reason, the researchers only received one partner's perspective and could not generalize the findings to LDDR dyads. Future research should be attentive to this weakness and aim to improve holistic results by including both relational partners in the study. As many of the questions inquired about possibly sensitive topics (e.g., "I call my boyfriend/girlfriend unexpectedly, just to see where he/she is" and "How often do you wish you hadn't gotten in this relationship?"), respondents' answers could have also been attributed to the problem of social desirability.

### **Future Research**

In the future, this study could be extended to include qualitative methods like focus groups and interviews in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants view the impact of Facebook on their LDDRs. Such studies would collect and analyze various themes seen throughout LDDRs, and could extend the knowledge in the field of social media platforms and its implications on LD couples, while simultaneously eliminating the gender imbalance present in the study by interviewing an equal amount of males and females. As the margins of the results for the first two hypotheses were not strong enough for us to make definite conclusions, future research could delve more extensively into the relationship between Facebook and relational satisfaction. Additionally, a content analysis could be conducted regarding the question of how the media affect and send certain messages regarding LDDRs to people.

Finally, as the results were impacted by a high percentage of neutral responses, this study could be adjusted in the future to include a four-point Likert scale. Eliminating the neutral option

would increase participants' likelihood of answering the questions in either agreement or disagreement, and could lead to more conclusive and supportive results.



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### Appendix

#### 1. Informed Consent

- 1 Yes I agree to participate and I am 18 years or older.
- 2 No, I do not wish to participate, or I am under 18 years old.

#### 2. Are you currently in a long-distance relationship in which both you and your partner actively use Facebook?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No

First, please respond to the following items about your romantic partner's activity on Facebook compared to yours:

#### 3. My partner updates their status on Facebook more often than me.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

#### 4. My partner posts more pictures on Facebook than me.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

#### 5. My partner comments on other people's postings more often than I do.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

#### 6. My partner likes other people's postings, including pictures, more often than me.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

#### 7. Overall, I would say that my partner checks Facebook more often than I do.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

Now, please respond to the following items about your romantic partner's presence on Facebook:

8. My partner is tagged in more Facebook postings than me. (e.g., pictures, posts, statuses, and comments)

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

9. In regards to Facebook, it appears that my partner has a more active social life than I do.

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

10. My partner is tagged in events on Facebook that I didn't know he/she attended.

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

Now, please answer the following questions about your current romantic partner and the status of your relationship:

11. How well does your partner meet your needs?

1 Poorly

2 Not Well

3 Average

4 Well

5 Extremely Well

12. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

1 Extremely Unsatisfied

2 Unsatisfied

3 Neutral

4 Satisfied

5 Extremely Satisfied

13. How good is your relationship compared to most?

1 Poor

2 Fair

- 3 Average
- 4 Good
- 5 Excellent

14. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship? (Reverse coded)

- 1 Never
- 2 Rarely
- 3 Sometimes
- 4 Often
- 5 Very Often

15. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

- 1 Never
- 2 Hardly at All
- 3 Occasionally
- 4 Mostly
- 5 Completely

16. How much do you love your partner?

- 1 Not at all
- 2 Not much
- 3 Average
- 4 Some
- 5 Completely

17. How many problems are there in your relationship? (Reverse coded)

- 1 Very Few
- 2 Few
- 3 Average
- 4 Many
- 5 Very Many

Now, please answer the following questions about how confident you are in your current romantic partner's actions and devotion to you:

18. I suspect that my boyfriend/girlfriend is secretly seeing someone else.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

19. I am worried that a member of the opposite sex may be chasing after my boyfriend/girlfriend.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral

- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

20. I suspect that my boyfriend/girlfriend may be attracted to someone else.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

21. I question my boyfriend/girlfriend about his/her activity on Facebook (e.g., comments, photos, wall posts).

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

22. I call my boyfriend/girlfriend unexpectedly, just to see where he/she is.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

23. I feel concerned about my relationship after viewing my partner's Facebook activity.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neutral
- 4 Agree
- 5 Strongly Agree

Finally, please answer the following questions about yourself:

24. What is your sex?

- 1 Male
- 2 Female

25. What is your age?

26. What is your current year in school?

- 1 Freshman
- 2 Sophomore
- 3 Junior
- 4 Senior
- 5 Other/Not Applicable

27. How long have you been in your current romantic relationship?

- 1 Less than 6 months
- 2 6 months to 1 year
- 3 1 to 2 years
- 4 2 or more years

28. How often do you visit Facebook per day?

- 1 I don't visit Facebook everyday
- 2 Once
- 3 Twice
- 4 More than three times

29. How long do you spend on Facebook per day?

- 1 I don't visit Facebook everyday
- 2 Less than 30 minutes
- 3 1 hour
- 4 More than 1 hour